Music City Mall; Odessa, Texas

June 07, 2013 | Texas | Posted by Prange Way

Odessa, Texas, home to nearly 100,000 residents, is located in a flat, dry area of West Texas, known for ranching and oil. Along with its neighbor directly to the east, Midland, Odessa shares a sub-region of West Texas known as the Permian Basin, a mostly flat area of plains, rich in both petroleum deposits and the boom-to-bust-to-boom economy that comes with it.

Today, around 266,000 people live in the Midland-Odessa Metropolitan Area. Isolated from other major cities in Texas, folks in the region must travel between four and five hours to reach either El Paso to the west, or the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex to the east. Other, smaller regional hubs are a bit closer: San Angelo, Lubbock, and Abilene, Texas, are all about two hours away.

Two super-regional malls exist in Midland and Odessa today: Odessa's Music City Mall and Midland's Midland Park Mall. Much like Midland and Odessa are twin cities, their malls also share similarities. Both malls offer Dillard's, JCPenney, and Sears, both opened in 1980, and both malls weren't the first in their respective city.

Music City Mall, located on the northeast side of Odessa, along Highway 191 and kitty-corner to the University of Texas – Permian Basin, opened in 1980 as Permian Mall. Just as Midland's Midland Park Mall wasn't the first mall in Midland, Permian Mall wasn't Odessa's first enclosed

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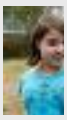

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mall. The much smaller Winwood Mall, located a few hundred feet to the west, predated it by several years. Winwood opened in 1973 and was anchored by a movie theatre, Woolco, Montgomery Ward and JCPenney, the latter of which moved to Permian Mall when it opened. An undated photo of an entrance of Winwood Mall is located here. Is this photo the interior of Winwood Mall? (It's not labeled.) Today, Winwood Mall is called Winwood Town Center, and has been transformed from enclosed mall into a row of both Big Box and smaller stores in typical strip-mall fashion. Major retailers at today's Winwood Town Center include Texas-based HEB (grocery), Ross Dress For Less, Michaels, Hastings, and Target. When did the original Winwood close? When was it demolished?

At some point, Permian Mall was renamed Music City Mall to capitalize on the fact that it houses three stages for live entertainment, which takes place mostly during weekends. In terms of size and layout, Music City Mall has 750,000 square-feet of retail space on one level, and the layout of the mall is a basic zig-zag with anchors at each turn. Current anchors include JCPenney, Dillards, Burlington Coat Factory, and Sears, as well as an 11-screen movie theater. Burlington Coat Factory is somewhat new to the Music City scene, replacing a Mervyn's that closed in the 2000s.

Music City Mall, while slightly larger than Midland's Midland Park Mall, has not enjoyed the same level of success, nor does it have the same caliber of in-line stores. In addition to several notable vacancies, one wing of Music City Mall is flanked by a local television station. The remainer of the 750,000 square-foot mall contains a high number of local stores versus national chains, which is generally undesirable in regional malls today. In contrast, Midland Park Mall has many typical national chains such as Abercrombie and Fitch, Aeropostale, American Eagle, and Buckle. However, Music City Mall does have the corner on live performance venues as well as the only ice rink facility within a 300-mile radius. In addition, Music City Mall also has a food court; yet, much like the rest of the mall, the food court contains many local vendors instead of national chain food outlets.

Also unique to Music City Mall is this somewhat large display of the Bible's Ten Commandments, seen here in 2009:

An audience of chairs was placed facing the Ten Commandments, inviting mall patrons to sit and relax while viewing the display, which was roped off so people can't get too close. Is it still there? Is this a permanent fixture of the mall, or was it some sort of temporary exhibition? I've never seen anything like it in any other mall, and it was interesting to say the least. It sort of reminds me of the praying hands sculpture at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, in terms of religious public art. I think that's what they were going for, at least?

I visited Music City Mall in November 2009 and took the pictures featured on this page. Please feel free to leave any comments or observations you have, and help us fill in the retail history of Midland and Odessa.

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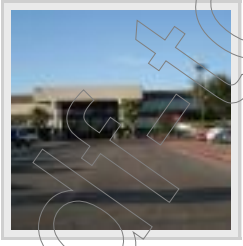

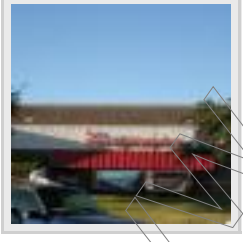

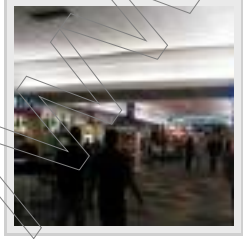

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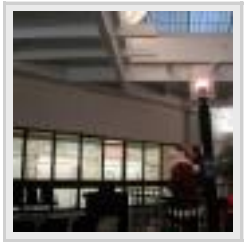

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Midland Park Mall; Midland, Texas

June 07, 2013 | Texas | Posted by Prange Way

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Midland, Texas, home to 111,000 residents, is located in a flat, dry region of sparsely populated West Texas known for ranching and oil. Along with its neighbor directly to the west, Odessa, Midland shares a sub-region of West Texas known as the Permian Basin, a mostly flat area of plains, rich in both petroleum deposits and the boom-to-bust-to-boom economy that comes with it.

Today, around 266,000 people live in the Midland-Odessa Metropolitan Area. Isolated from other major cities in Texas, folks in the region must travel between four and five hours to reach either El Paso to the west, or the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex to the east. Other, smaller regional hubs are a bit closer: San Angelo, Lubbock, and Abilene, Texas, are around two hours away.

Two super-regional malls exist in Midland and Odessa today: Odessa's Music City Mall and Midland's Midland Park Mall. The two malls are only twenty minutes apart, and are the only regional malls within a two hour radius. Like the twin cities of Midland and Odessa, both malls share similarities. Both malls offer Dillard's, JCPenney, and Sears, both opened in 1980, and both malls were not the original enclosed malls in either city.

Midland Park Mall opened in 1980, on the northwest side of Midland, located at Loop 250 and Midkiff Road. Slightly smaller than Odessa's Music City Mall, Midland Park Mall has around 650,000 square feet and a more linear layout pattern, with a slight bend in the mall in the Sears wing. Its anchors are Sears, Dillards, JCPenney, and Old Navy, which are very similar to that of Music City Mall, and what it lacks for size comparison with Music City it makes up for in popular national chain stores. Stores such as G by Guess, Abercrombie and Fitch, Aeropostale, American Eagle, and Zumiez flank the halls at Midland Park, and are strikingly absent at Music City. In addition, the food court is flanked with the typical national food court chains such as Chik-Fil-A, and it's apparent that the quality on offer is better than that at Music City. However, there is no ice skating rink at Midland Park, nor are there several live entertainment venues to entertain shoppers. Nor is there a Ten Commandments display.

Also, much like Odessa's Music City Mall, Midland Park Mall was not the first mall in town. The Dellwood Mall, located less than three miles south of Midland Park Mall along Midkiff Road at the corner of Illinois Avenue, was Midland's first enclosed mall. When did it open? What were its anchors, other than Kresge's and Dunlap's? Today, Dellwood Mall has been renamed Kingsway Mall, and still stands despite some modifications to house a Church and Family Dollar. Can you still go in and walk around here?

I visited Midland Park Mall in November 2009 and took the pictures featured on this page. Please feel free to leave any comments or observations you have, and help us fill in the retail history of Midland and Odessa.

Pictures from November 2009:

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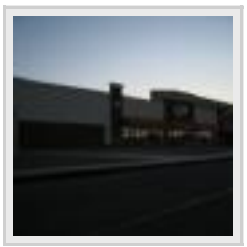

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CenterPoint MarketPlace; Stevens Point, Wisconsin

December 02, 2012 | Dead Malls, Wisconsin | Posted by Prange Way

Well, hey. Remember me? It's been a while, I know. But I'm back, with a new story.

Stevens Point, Wisconsin, is a city of 26,000 located in the center of the state. Its major exports are college graduates from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, one of 13 public four-year Universities in the

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state, and beer from Point Brewery, which I'm partial to. A decent-sized paper mill and a few Insurance companies round out the economy here, among other businesses and services.

And, of course, the Stevens Point area once had a mall. Heck, there were even two in the area. Now they have none. Zero. Zilch. Nada. The big goose egg.

The Stevens Point area's first mall was located in suburban Plover, a smaller city located just south of Stevens Point, and it opened in 1984. I missed seeing this one, but the interweb seems to indicate it was very small and later became part of Rainbow Falls Water Park, which itself ultimately closed in the early 2000s. The mall was apparently demolished in 2003. It also seemed to have two names: Manufacturers Outlet Mall and Plover Mall. Anyone know anything about it? Any photos? All I could find were some back issues of a local paper with a few advertisements mentioning stores in the mall.

Even before Plover Mall (or whatever it was called) appeared on the scene, a national mall developer (sources indicate Melvin Simon and Associates) had been interested in building a large-scale mall on the edge of Stevens Point, located near the interchange of US 10 and US 51 (later I-39). This proposal, introduced several years earlier in the late 1970s, was continually blocked by locals and ultimately lost steam as the years progressed. A few years later, a different developer came up with a different proposal – to build a regional mall in the middle of downtown Stevens Point. Several blocks of downtown Stevens Point would need to be razed for this development, but the developer marketed this under the careful guise of "urban renewal" because downtown Stevens Point was flagging, as were many cities' downtowns nationwide. This proposal won the backing of locals because it meant their downtown, which had lost its luster in recent years, would once again be the vibrant, retail-dominant center they had known in the early and mid 20th century. Groundbreaking for this downtown mall, named CenterPoint Mall, took place in September 1984, and the mall's grand opening took place in October 1985.

Anchored by two department stores, JCPenney and Green Bay-based ShopKo, with space for a third anchor, CenterPoint Mall opened with space for 60 smaller stores under one enclosed roof. The 220,000 square foot mall was never very successful, despite ample parking in the middle of downtown and only a few blocks from the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, a campus with over 10,000 students. The mall never filled to capacity, nor attracted the quality of stores present in larger regional malls such as Wausau Center, located just 30 minutes north of Stevens Point in Wausau.

Its decor was pretty standard for the mid-80s, with terrazzo-tiled floors, wood and brick layered storefronts, lengthy skylights, and many plants and trees poking out from sidewalk-style grates as well as from blocky wooden planters. At night, the mall really lit up with marquee-style rows of lighting along the skylights, giving

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its interior a dramatic, lively appearance. I sort of liked it, even though it was more than half dead for most of its existence. The layout of the mall was a simple dumbbell with a somewhat narrow main walkway. Pretty standard stuff for a city this size.

CenterPoint Mall was part of a larger trend and planning convention for urban renewal in cities across the country. The logic for the convention came from the fact that suburban-style malls had been enjoying incredible success in suburbs and the peripheries of cities, at the expense of downtowns, which had been the vibrant focal point of cities since their inception. Stores were rapidly leaving downtowns for these malls nationwide, and downtowns across the country were becoming outmoded derelict ghost towns. Beginning in the 1960s, and through at least the mid-1980s, developers had success convincing cities to tear up their aging, decrepit downtowns to put in typical regional malls. Many of these, especially in smaller cities, even had the same large, free parking lots shoppers enjoyed in the suburbs. Cities were quick to give up space to these developments, unfortunately tearing down many historic landmarks in the process. Ah, the prospect of progress, to make something old new again.

Examples of developments like these took place in Rochester, NY (Midtown Plaza), Salem, OR (Salem Center), White Plains, NY (several malls), Santa Maria, CA (Town Center), Milwaukee, WI (Grand Avenue Mall), Columbus, OH (City Center), and some even closer to Stevens Point in Oshkosh (Park Plaza Mall), Appleton (Avenue Mall), Wisconsin Rapids (Rapids Mall), and Wausau (Wausau Center). The list obviously goes on, and there are many more examples nationwide. The majority of these developments have struggled through the 1990s into the present, and many have been repurposed, are struggling, or have scaled back considerably. Interestingly, Wausau Center is an exception, having enjoyed success and helping to create a more vibrant downtown in the process.

The dire implications of many of these developments result from improper positioning, pitting suburban interests against downtown constraints. The suburban model of retail cannot easily be superimposed on its predecessor (and arguably, its replacement as of late), the downtown. First, by the time many downtowns were repurposed to house traditional enclosed malls, there was already a sort of competition on the periphery of these cities. In Stevens Point's case, several suburban-style retail clusters had already popped up on the north, east, and south sides of the city. The synergy of collective business, strip malls, and big box stores in these clusters helped them thrive, whereas there was no extra room downtown for these types of stores. While the mall had free parking, the rest of downtown was still constrained by on-street parking, and by tearing up several blocks of downtown to put in the mall there was even less of a reason to shop at the more traditional streetfront downtown stores.

This leads to the next point – ripping up a downtown grid to put in a huge mall is simply poor planning style. Several through-streets were truncated at the mall, creating a loss of flow through downtown. Areas directly north of the mall were suddenly completely cut off from downtown by the several block long development.

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As the years went on, Pointers chose to shop at the businesses in the peripheral retail districts, or in nearby Wausau or Appleton rather than their own mall. As such, the mall was never fully occupied. More importantly, it was thus never able to attract the kind of destination stores to get people in the doors. There was never an American Eagle, Victoria's Secret, Pottery Barn, or the like.

In the late 1990s, a small apparel-oriented department store, Stage, opened as CenterPoint Mall's third anchor, on the north-facing side in the center. Unfortunately, Stage was short-lived, and closed after only two years, in 2000. In 2003, Dunham's Sports opened in this space, but they too only lasted a few years, moving to the US 10 strip on the east side for a bigger store.

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Not long after, the mall began its long, slow spiral into oblivion. A visit in 2010 yielded a total of five stores open. In May of that year, JCPenney decided to call it quits and close their store, putting 39 folks out of work. That same year, the Central Wisconsin Children's Museum departed as well. You know your mall is dead when a museum leaves…

Meanwhile, the mall had been in foreclosure, and the remaining handful of tenants began to trickle out. In May 2011, the city of Stevens Point declared the mall blighted and condemned it. This outraged Valley Bank of Iowa, who owned the mall in receivership, and they unsuccessfully sued the city to win back the mall. The city then scored a $750,000 federal block grant to redevelop the mall, and in March 2012, the doors to the mall were permanently closed to the public. ShopKo is the only store to remain, as its building is technically owned and operated as a separate entity.

I happened to stop by CenterPoint Mall one hot day in June 2012, and took the second set of photos that day. I was actually unaware the mall was closed to the public, as ShopKo was open and the entrance next to ShopKo was propped open with some activity. A maintenance man was doing something near the entrance, and a couple girls walked into the mall ahead of me, so I thought nothing of the fact that I shouldn't have been there. This changed, however, when I saw that the many fig trees planted in the mall's main walkway had lost most of their leaves onto the floor, creating a crunchy carpet of green and brown. I was able to walk the entire length of the mall unquestioned, as the two girls who walked in ahead of me went into a dead store that appeared to be some makeshift community center or charity or something. They hung out in the store talking and giggling, and I walked the length of the mall full of dead trees. It was a strange, eerie moment. I actually only discovered the mall was supposed to be shut when I got to the other end and saw notices on another set of entry doors that said the mall was permanently closed that March. Whoops.

In all, it was a satisfying but bittersweet visit. I got a chance to say goodbye to a mall I'd visited several times, and one I was always perplexed by. Demolition of CenterPoint Marketplace began in August 2012, and today most of the mall is history. Mid-State Technical College will move into a former portion of the mall in 2013, and ShopKo is open for business as usual. Third Street was extended through part of the former mall as it had been before the mall opened, almost exactly 27 years ago. What's old is now new again, and as downtowns across the nation are experiencing a resurgence, Americans want denser, more urban developments and the organic well-designed community gathering space of a traditional downtown.

Elsewhere on the web:

- Flickr set of the mall from Andrew T. with useful commentary, from 2010
- A look back at CenterPoint Mall history, with many early photos, from the Stevens Point Journal

Photos from March 2001:

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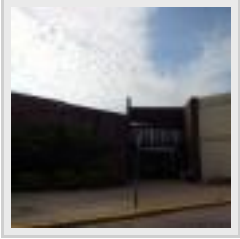
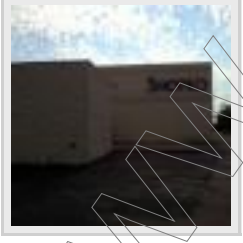
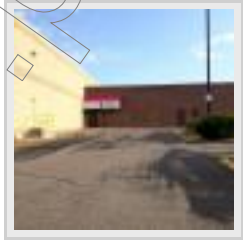
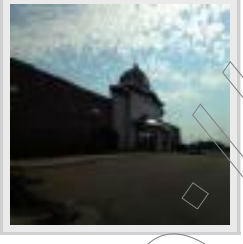
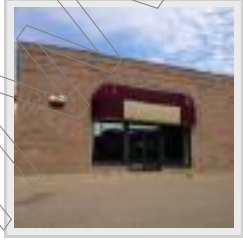
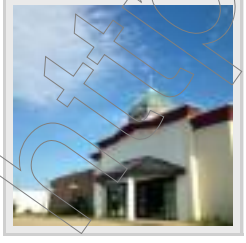
Photos from June 2012:





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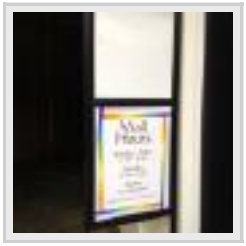

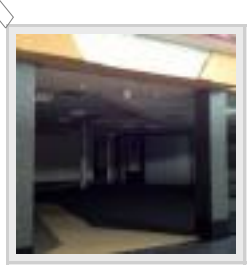

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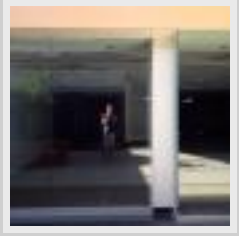
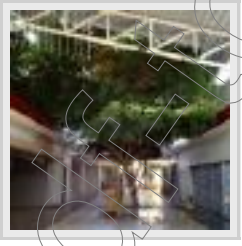
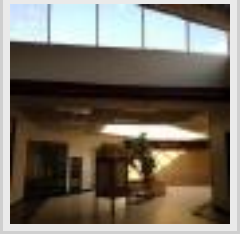
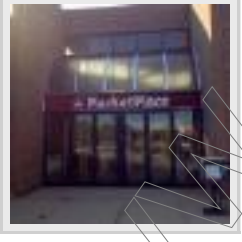
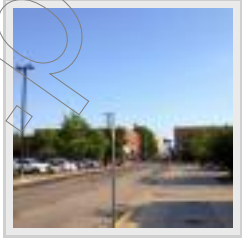
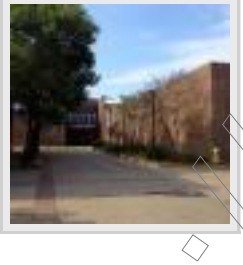
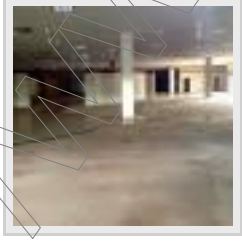

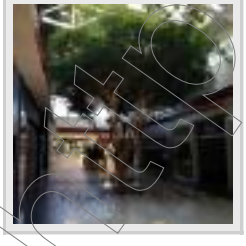

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Victor Gruen and the Birth of the Shopping Mall

August 22, 2012 | Uncategorized | Posted by Caldor

It shouldn't be any surprise that we idolize Victor Gruen at Labelscar. It's not just because, 60 years ago, he invented the form of shopping center that is the primary focus of this blog (though that's a big part of it) but also for a few more reasons. One is that he had the same appreciation for the form of the mall that we do, and that he similarly didn't see them just as places of commerce. Somewhat surprisingly, both of Labelscar's co-authors are a) men and b) not big *shoppers*, overall. We don't write about malls because we're obsessed with fashion and consumerism, so much as that we write about them because of fond memories of their function as exciting community meeting places when we were younger, growing up in fairly dull suburbia. Gruen's creations were some of the only places in our world that brought together the masses, creating a blur of 1980s stone-washed denim jeans, gurgling penny fountains, Reebok Pumps, NKOTB cassingles, and women wearing sequin-studded dresses and sporting heavily-teased up-dos (replace with your own cultural reference points if you're older or younger; you'll undoubtedly have equally-vivid memories). In other words, the random mass of humanity, all partaking of junky consumer culture, yes, but it was still a place that young, old, rich, poor, all races, etc., all sort of collided into one place. Victor Gruen created the mall a few decades earlier specifically for people like us: he was an Austrian Jew who moved to the US during World War II and felt that the strip-based style of development at the time was lacking in community and soul. Malls were his way of creating hubs to serve as gathering spaces that would feel like European town centers, complete with civic amenities, artwork, fountains, and more.

Unfortunately, malls were also *supposed* to serve as hubs for transit and mixed-uses with residential, office, healthcare, and other services all available in one pedestrian-friendly place. Sadly for Gruen, much of his original vision was sacrificed by developers in favor of the profitable all-retail-surrounded-by-parking formula, and Gruen died a somewhat bitter man who was ashamed at how his creation was so misunderstood. He came to be seen as the anti-Jane Jacobs (she who is the mother of new urbanism) but both had the same belief in the value and power of cities, they just both had dramatically different opinions about how to get there. Jacobs believed in walkability and the organic growth of neighborhoods via smaller lot sizes–an opinion I agree with, as do many–whereas Gruen felt that large-scale redevelopment could modernize cities and stop the flow of the middle class to the suburbs with a higher standard of living or simply provide a sense of place to new areas that lacked any history. Although Gruen's urban redevelopment projects, such as the West End in Boston, saw very mixed success and even destroyed the kinds of places Jacobs sought to defend, they also served their purpose for a time. (Yours truly even lives in a 1970s-planned neighborhood within the city of San Francisco that was plotted out based on a very Gruen-esque ideology, and although it's a very nice place to live it is lacking in the kind of character most people associate with my city).

Ultimately, the fact that Gruen had so many of the right ideas–and that they were so much more well-intentioned than anyone familiar with a "mall" would assume–is part of what makes him such a fascinating character. This documentary goes into some of the history of the man's life and creations, and although it's long (about an hour!) it's worth a viewing for anyone who is interested in the history of malls and the man who invented them.

(Thanks for the heads-up, Eric)

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It's Mall Week at The AV Club

August 22, 2012 | Uncategorized | Posted by Caldor

In real life, the Lone Pine Mall from Back to the Future is the Puente Hills Mall in City of Industry, California

Do you read the Onion's AV Club? If you don't, you might not be aware that it's "Mall Week" over there, with a slew of posts all about malls and pop culture. Today, they had a post that very well could've appeared here at Labelscar on the beautiful artificiality of American malls:

> *Yet what appeals most to me about the design and execution of malls is that there remain kinks that can never be wholly smoothed out—especially once the facilities start to age. The plastic plants gather dust. The public's interest in dipped candles and video arcades wanes. Retail spaces open up, and are often re-filled with much less care than in the original plan. My fondest memories of the malls of my youth are the stores that seemed out of place: the weird little collectibles outlets or quasi head shops that worked their way into the mall community and then hung in.*

Go check it out, and then read the rest of the Mall Week articles, including a run-down of pivotal movie scenes happening in malls or an analysis of how malls in movies double as time machines.

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